M541J

Series 19 JANUARY, 1926 No. 2

Meredith College

QUARTERLY BULLETIN

1925-26

UNIV OF ILLINOIS LIBRARY
JUL 1 1926

JOHN CHARLES McNEILL*

By
MARY LOOMIS SMITH
Assistant Professor of English

Published by Meredith College in November, January, March, and June

Entered as second-class matter, January 17, 1910, at the post-office at Raleigh, N. C., under the act of July 16, 1894

*[Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Philosophy, Columbia University.]

JOHN CHARLES McNEILL

By

Mary Loomis Smith

Assistant Professor of English, Meredith College

John Charles McNeill is the greatest poet North Carolina has yet produced, for he, better than any other, has imparted to his verse the "essence of local fine feeling" and has, at the same time, lifted it above the plane of the provincial toward the realm of the universal. Indeed, the larger success was achieved by means of the smaller, and his rank among the poets of the state is deservedly higher than that of John Henry Boner, who possessed broader advantages of training and experience, but lost the "curious fascination of locale"[1] that distinguishes McNeill's work.

Moreover, the purpose of his art was undivided, and his field, while rich, was small, for he sought to express life in terms of what he best knew and loved—the simple aspects of farm and home in North Carolina, and the quiet unpretending folk, the honest yeomanry of the state. This aim and scope of his work is clearly defined in his *Home Songs:*

"The little loves and sorrows are my song:
The leafy lanes and birthsteads of my sires,
Where memory broods by winter's evening fires
O'er oft-told joys, and ghosts of ancient wrong;
The little cares and carols that belong
To home-hearts, and old rustic lutes and lyres,
And spreading acres, where calm-eyed desires
Wake with the dawn, unfevered, fair, and strong.

"If words of mine might lull the brain to sleep,
And tell the meaning in a mother's eyes;
Might counsel love, and teach their eyes to weep
Who, o'er their dead, question unanswering skies,
More worth than legions in the dust of strife,
Time, looking back at last, should count my life."

[1] Graham, E. K.: The Poetry of John Charles McNeill.

Although the strength of McNeill's poetry must rest, largely, on its native flavor, on his power to recreate the simple, commonplace things of life as he knew them away down home, this strength is a limitation, in that it narrows the circle of his influence. For all North Carolina's enthusiastic praise of him, it must be admitted that there has not been any wide recognition of his poetry beyond the borders of the state of which he wrote, and of which his personality was an intimate possession.

Yet, McNeill cannot be called a local poet, for he has not dealt with provincial problems, and with emotions strange to the world outside North Carolina, nor has he spoken, entirely, in a provincial idiom. We cannot, even, term him Southern in mood, for he is one of the few minor poets of the South who has not blindly followed the inspiration of Poe, Lanier and Timrod, nor yielded to the "offended melancholy," characteristic of much southern verse. He is southern by birth, temperament and experience, but he is not, in the least, sectional in spirit. Joel Chandler Harris once said, in speaking of the ideal southern writer: "He must be southern and yet cosmopolitan; he must be intensely local in feeling, but utterly unprejudiced and unpartisan as to opinions, tradition and sentiment."[1] That McNeill shared this ideal is seen in the fact that, while he wrote for North Carolina and the South, he also wrote for the home and the human heart, wherever they may be found.

In his unwavering fidelity to the "hearthstone moods" which were his theme, we see the influence of his favorite poet, Burns, who, of one time and place, and singing in an unfamiliar dialect, yet voiced the experiences of man the world over. McNeill lacked the great genius and, hence, the universality of appeal that characterize Burns' song, but by those who knew him he was accorded greater praise than Burns' contemporaries gave to him, and their hopes for a wider recognition of his work were ended only by his untimely death.

It is a difficult task to write the story of genius, and even more delicate a matter to record that of a rare and gifted spirit like

[1] Mims, Edwin: Sidney Lanier.

McNeill who approached, very closely, to genius, and whose life was one of promise, rather than actual accomplishment. Mere dates and petty happenings cannot explain his development, nor can we measure the influences of heredity and environment. Yet, a knowledge of the bare facts of his life will, necessarily, lead to a better appreciation of his work.

In the first place, McNeill was almost entirely a product of North Carolina, a state that, with its sturdy homogeneous people, retains the best elements of conservatism that characterized the Old South, and yet welcomes the spirit of progress typical of the New South. Perhaps no section of the state has remained so free from the taint of foreign influences, and has encouraged so fine a culture as the old Scotch community of Spring Hill, where McNeill was born and reared.

It is an ideal spot for a poet, situated as it is in the eastern part of the state where life flows leisurely along, and the rude world of getting and spending seems very remote. There are, instead, low-spreading homesteads, surrounded by stretches of fields of corn and cotton, and orchards, abloom with color, or heavy with the harvest. In the background, sombre against the horizon, stand the woods of cypress, pine and gum, and throughout there winds the Lumbee River, dark and slow.

No less significant than the plenty, peace and leisure of the country itself was the life of the old community, in McNeill's boyhood. A part of the original Scotch settlement in North Carolina, its life centered around three typical Scotch institutions—the church, the schools, and the "The Temperance Lodge" (a debating organization) which represented the spiritual, intellectual, moral and social forces at work in the community. Here, John Charles McNeill was born July 26, 1874, as favored by hereditary influences as by those of environment; he came of fine old Scotch ancestry, his grandfathers John McNeill and Charles Livingston (for whom he was named) having emigrated from Argyleshire about the beginning of the nineteenth century. McNeill's father, Captain Duncan McNeill, has been described as "a stalwart citizen, fond of public speaking, an

earnest supporter of church and party, a writer of verse, an insatiable reader and, personally, a most delightful companion"[1]; and his mother, Euphemia Livingston, was a woman of rare culture and nobility of character. To her life and influence her son paid tribute in his exquisite *Lines.*

Charles—the youngest of five children, and the pet of the whole family of uncles, aunts and cousins—spent a happy, carefree boyhood, similar to that of many a well-to-do farmer's son. For, to mind the cows, help with the light chores of household and farm, attend school in the hours, and explore woods, river and swamp, between times, were the common tasks and joys of the Spring Hill youth. He was the acknowledged leader of these "sunburnt boys," of whom he later wrote, and he excelled in their contests of running, jumping, diving, swimming and rowing. The many cousins—for nearly all of the boys and girls of the old Spring Hill community were related to each other, after the good old southern fashion of claiming kin—bear witness to his love for mischief. Always full of fun and ready for a good joke, he was in the more obstreperous days of youth a terror to the little girls of the neighborhood, at the various country dances and candy-pullings. At school in the old academy, three "walking miles" from his home, he still spent a good part of his time playing pranks on the other children. In spite of this, he managed to know his lessons, for he was an apt student and absorbed knowledge without much effort on his part. It is said that he bore off all the prizes and was popular in spite of the fact. Later, this youthful record of excellence was maintained at Whiteville Academy, where his secondary education was completed.

There was, even in his boyhood, a fine appreciation of nature as well as a love for knowledge that set him apart from his companions. Certainly, he would not have made so successful a farmer, for it is said that his furrows were usually crooked, because he would try to read and plough at the same time. His insatiable thirst for reading that impelled him to carry

[1] Bailey, J. W.: John Charles McNeill.

with him about the farm and on his rambles a play of Shakespeare or a volume of Burns' poetry did not deaden his powers of observation. Not only were the sights and sounds of wood and field and river known to him as by second nature; he was also interested in the homely features of farm-life, in the negro songs and customs. On the surface these early years seemed uneventful ones, with their daily rounds of work and pleasure, but his impressionable mind was busy storing up material, later to be crystallized into poetry. In fact, a close study of his poetry reveals the fact that almost all of the observations, dreams, and memories to which he gave expression came from these days of honest toil and simple, wholesome fun, at the old home.

The five years that followed this early period of McNeill's career were significant ones in the shaping of his mind and character. In the fall of 1894, he entered Wake Forest College, with the strong determination to graduate in spite of many disadvantages. His ambition to go to college had been discouraged, at home, because of his father's financial difficulties; finally, his sister had lent him enough money to pay his traveling expenses. He hoped, somehow, to make his way and luck was with him from the start, for soon after the beginning of college, he had the unusual fortune of being made assistant corrector of themes. Dr. B. F. Sledd, professor of English, and the man who did most toward training his poetic talent, tells this story:

"It was in the autumn of 1894, if I remember aright, that John Charles McNeill matriculated in my Freshman English Class. I recall how I opened my eyes in wonder over his first composition. There was that indescribable something which we call style—real, genuine style; the writing of one who handles his pen as to the manner born. Now, style in a Freshman's composition is as rare as speech among the birds, so I thought it well to ask Mr. McNeill whence he had derived his inspiration. But when the tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed boy came up to my desk, the question was never asked him. His very presence had spoken for him; the man and the style were one. Men of genius have ever possessed striking personalities, and Mr.

McNeill certainly bore outwardly the marks of a genius. An assistant was needed at the time in the English department, and, Freshman though he was, Mr. McNeill was at once chosen for the place."[1]

Concerning McNeill during this same period, Dr. Charles E. Taylor, of the Department of Philosophy, says: "From the first there was something exceptional about him which gave him a place apart. He began on the threshold of his student life to show that he was of an unusual type, both as student and man." Quoting McNeill's grades in various courses throughout his academic career—grades almost unbelievably high, he adds: "In order to have achieved these high grades, the young man must have been, and, indeed, was an assiduous worker. . . . It may be doubted whether any other student read more widely or to better purpose than he, and he ever showed an eager love of truth and an alert, daring, speculation. But, I do not think that he knew drudgery, the wearing grind of study. His mind was quick to discern and receive; his memory was tenacious in retaining. Because he mastered rapidly and with comparative ease his allotted tasks, the casual observer would have judged of the excellence of his work by the results, rather than by the process of acquisition."[2]

While an arduous student, engaged with his regular work and the study of law, besides, McNeill interested himself in all phases of college life, and was leader and general favorite, because of his fine sense of humor, unassuming manner and kindly sympathy. One of his fellow-students probably expressed the general opinion when he said: "We recognized his genius, but we appreciated him more for the charms of his personality, for he was one of us."[3]

Honors, it seems, were heaped upon McNeill throughout his college career. Not only was he appointed tutor in English, in his first year, but he also won the Dixon Medal, awarded the best essayist, and he graduated valedictorian of his class in

[1] Sledd, B. F.: McNeill, the Poet.
[2] Taylor, C. E.: The Student Life of John Charles McNeill.
[3] Page, H. F.: John Charles McNeill.

1898. The recognition which pleased him most was the editorship of the college magazine, "The Student," which he held for two years in succession. To this work he gave the best that was in him; fearless of spirit he did not hesitate to voice his opinions and those of the student body, in clever, concise and forceful editorials. Indeed, one of his most marked characteristics was a sturdy Scotch independence, an indifference to adverse criticism. To this, perhaps, was largely due his carelessness in regard to his personal appearance and social conventions in general. It was not that he took pride in being peculiar, but that he considered such matters trivial, and not meriting any great atttention.

The year following his graduation McNeill was again at Wake Forest, working for his Master's Degree and acting as instructor in English. One of his pupils has given an intimate glimpse of him in this capacity: "Before his class Mr. McNeill lost nothing of his magnetic manner. It was rather intensified, especially when presenting one of his favorite authors. He was naturally more sympathetic than critical in his discussions. He felt the inner beauty and soul of poetry and endeavored to imbue the mind of the student with something of the same appreciation. . . . His manner was simple, direct, forceful. His vein of quaint elusive humor appeared here at greatest advantage. Tactfully, and yet without the least indication of studied effort, he held the attention of his class. His low, rich voice—marvelously musical—possessed a holding power such as is rarely met. To me this was the most remarkable of his personal charms."[1]

The period that followed the completion of his work at Wake Forest seems to have been one of uncertainty and unhappiness—one in which he was striving to find himself. In 1899-1900 he held the position of professor of English at Mercer University, Macon, Georgia, during the year's leave of absence of the regular professor. The next year he returned to North Carolina and began the practice of law at Laurinburg, his license having

[1] Page, H. F.: John Charles McNeill.

been granted by the Supreme Court of the State in 1897. Although he met with some success in the profession, his talents did not lie in that direction, and it was with difficulty that he forced himself to attend to his work. A friend who knew him intimately says of a day spent in his office, at this time: "There were clients, but their causes were obviously foreign to the genius of Mr. McNeill. While he would be discussing some poem, or reading, at my request, one of his own, in would come some troubled person seeking his assistance in getting back a mule that had been swapped in a none too sober moment."[1]

In many respects, however, this was a fruitful period. McNeill was elected member of the House, to represent Scotland County in the State Legislature, and possessing, as he did, a rare knowledge of his people, and a sincere interest in their affairs, he served them efficiently. At the same time he was struggling for a more natural self-expression. He wrote frequently for the local papers, and succeeded in having his verses accepted by the *Century Magazine,* which published them, and encouraged him to send others. His writing began to attract the attention of the public, and in 1904 the *Charlotte Observer* gave McNeill his chance. How gladly he accepted it may be seen by his remark to a friend: "This is the most joyful day of my life. Mr. Caldwell has offered me a position on his paper. It is good-bye law."[2]

Such enthusiasm about securing a position on the staff of a daily newspaper in a North Carolina town seems strange unless one realizes what such a place meant to McNeill. It was an escape from irksome and distasteful work into that which appealed to him more strongly than any other, and it was more; it was the best means of access to the public for which he wished to write. For at that time the *Charlotte Observer* was far ahead of any other paper in the State, and was, in fact, one of the best published in the South. Mr. Joseph P. Caldwell, the editor, was a man of distinctive literary gifts, and with a keen

[1] Bailey, J. W.: John Charles McNeill.
[2] Bryant, H. E. C.: A New John Charles McNeill Book.

appreciation of ability in others, he had gathered about him men of great promise, among them Isaac Erwin Avery, whose *Idle Comments* were a newspaper classic in the state. Caldwell's kindliness of nature and persuasive power gave him great influence with "his boys," whom he encouraged to their highest literary work, he himself leading the way with brilliant editorials.

His offer to the young poet from the country was a singularly generous one. McNeill was assigned to no special post, and required to perform no particular work. He was to write whatever suited him, and whenever he chose to do it, and he received for his work a regular and adequate salary. With such freedom to exercise his talent, and in so congenial an atmosphere, it is not surprising that the poet found himself; and that in the three years of his connection with the *Observer,* he produced nearly all of his best work. Besides the poems which made McNeill a household name in the state, there were excellent reports of public occasions and much prose of a somewhat desultory but original character—paragraphs portraying life, humorous incidents, and now and then a series of homely and realistic fables.

Occasionally, tired of city life with its many distractions and temptations, McNeill would set out for home and the Lumbee River, for he never lost that strong attachment for home and old friends he has expressed in *When I Go Home, Away Down Home,* and *Sunburnt Boys.* One of the "sunburnt boys" tells of his return home, after the first year of college: "We felt that he would not be the same Charles, but to our delight we saw him go to the closet under the stairs and pull out his old last summer's trousers and sunshade hat, and his first question was, 'How's the river, boys?' And he was the same Charles throughout his short life. With the honors bestowed upon him at college and during his later career, he was always one of us—just a grown-up, curly-headed, sunburnt boy."[1]

[1] The Sunburnt Boys. Wake Forest Student XXVII, 4.

Among the honors that came McNeill's way, the most distinctive was the state's formal recognition of his work, October 19, 1905—a year after his column of verses began to appear in *The Observer*—when he was awarded the Patterson Cup for the best contribution to literature during the year. The occasion was one of peculiar interest, for it was the first presentation of the handsome cup offered as an incentive to the development of the literary talent of the state, and McNeill received it from the hands of President Roosevelt.

Within the year following, he published his first volume, a slender little book of verse, dedicated to Joseph P. Caldwell, "The Old Man," and entitled *Songs Merry and Sad.* Most of the poems it contained had appeared before in the *Century Magazine, The Youth's Companion,* and *The Charlotte Observer.* This volume found ready sale, and the first edition was soon exhausted. McNeill became not only the favorite writer of the public at large, but he won the ear of the whole state. Dr. Edward K. Graham, of the State University, said of it: "It is the most poetic collection by a North Carolinian that has yet appeared."[1]

But, even the most enthusiastic of McNeill's admirers regarded this work as only a prelude to the greater burst of song yet to come—poetic achievement that would place him among the greater American poets. The promise was not to be fulfilled, for early in 1907 a complication of diseases began to take hold upon him; he made a brave and hopeful but losing fight for life, for his constitution, never robust, had been enfeebled by dissipation. Although fully aware of his condition, McNeill continued to work and make plans, for his brain was strong and unclouded to the last. A letter written to Dr. H. E. Harmon, an intimate friend, reveals his spirit aglow with aspiration for the unattained, even in the presence of death:

"My dear Harmon: Your charming poems in Sunday's *Observer, In Some Sad Hour,* has touched me deeply. It expresses a thought which has come to me a thousand times of late, for,

[1] Graham, E. K.: The Poetry of John Charles McNeill.

somehow, I feel my hold upon life gradually slackening, and yet with this thought of going, before me all the time, I do not feel any lessening of the inspiration to write, nor a lack of interest in my future work and plans. I have many things to write which haunt me every day, and many seemingly worthwhile things to do. But I hope to tell you about those in person, and, until then, adieu."[1]

A stay in the mountains of the western part of the state seemed to restore his strength, but at last he returned home to die. Although he no longer had hope, he uttered no complaint, and found no fault with the bitterness of his lot. In his little room next to the roof, with its glimpses out through the vine-clad porch, of field, river, and distant woods in the full glory of autumnal coloring, he calmly and even triumphantly awaited the end. No better evidence of clearness and serenity of mind can be found than his sonnet *To Sleep,* written in hours of sleeplessness and pain. And when the summons came, October 17, 1907, he met it with the words, "Draw back the curtains boys, so that I may see the wind in the trees and catch the last rays of the autumn sundown." No more fitting tribute to his faith or comment on his unfinished life can be expressed than the last stanza of his poem *Sundown,* which is carved on his tomb, there in the quiet old churchyard of Spring Hill:

> "We know, O Lord, so little what is best,
> Wingless, we move as lowly;
> But in Thy calm all-knowledge let us rest
> Oh, holy, holy, holy!"

Since McNeill's death, North Carolina has not forgotten him, but has striven to keep his memory fresh in the hearts of those who knew him, and to extend his fame to the new generation, and beyond the borders of the state. A statue of him has been erected in Charlotte; articles concerning his life and work are from time to time published in the magazines and papers; no North Carolina Day is ever celebrated by the school children

[1] Harmon, H. E.: John Charles McNeill and His Work.

without tribute paid to him. And, in the year following his death, the manuscript of an unpublished volume of poems was edited and published in attractive form, under the title of *Lyrics From Cotton Land.* It consists chiefly of his humorous, dialect pieces, some of which have appeared before in *The Century* and *The Observer,* and it is a companion piece to *Songs Merry and Sad,* containing the more serious work. These two small volumes are the gift of McNeill's short life, cut off at the age of thirty-three. The story of such a life, written on the pages of history would seem all too brief and poor and incomplete, but, engraved in terms of his personality on the hearts of those who knew him, it contains elements of richness and beauty.

Everywhere—in the reminiscences of his home-people, in the stories of his college chums and business associates, even in the recollections of those who knew him merely in passing—there is the testimony that McNeill was one of the most lovable of men. In speaking of him, a friend of many years remarked: "I bear testimony that he was one of the most natural beings I have ever known; the most unselfish, the most unself-conscious. If he had serious burdens within his heart, he was too entirely unselfish to pour them out upon another. I do not think he had them. He expressed life in terms of beauty; he explained it to his friends from the unfailing viewpoint of humor, but he lived it without intent either to express or interpret. McNeill just lived—went singing and laughing down the great highway, because his heart must sing and laugh. Far from regarding himself as a poet, he protested against that conception. It was his nature to write his best and to be himself. His was a heart that found straightway a place in every heart that opens at the approach of the sweet human spirit. It was his lot to be loved as but few men have been; when he died, those who had known him underwent the shock of a strangely personal loss." [1]

No one was better capable of judging McNeill than "The Old Man" with whom he was closely associated for three years, and Mr. Caldwell has given this estimate of his personality: "The

[1] Bailey, J. W.: John Charles McNeill—The Man and the Poet.

public knew him through the exquisite verse he gave it, and through which ran his soul, and admired him; but to those who were in intimate personal contact with him, he attached himself with the tenderest ties of affection suggested by something else than his mere intellectual qualities. . . . There was the man in person, plain, simple, natural. He could not have pretended if he had wanted to; the beauty of his character was its perfect naturalness. He was amiable almost to a fault, and under this roof, where men are judged by each other, where friendships are cemented and characteristics discerned, no harsh word of his, no unkindly criticism by him of any human being can be recalled. . . . He compelled affection; without trying to find his way into the hearts of people he won irresistibly whoever came within the circle of his acquaintanceship."[1]

Perhaps the human appeal of his nature that gave so great a charm to his personality partly accounts for his faults, but it also largely atones for them. In this respect he differs widely from Burns, with whom he is often compared, because of a certain similarity of nature and type of genius. He lacked Burns' bitterness of spirit and, along with it, his power of sharp, merciless satire; thus, he made few enemies—if indeed he had any—and the friends who realized, most keenly, his weaknesses, forgave him and forgot them, because of the rare sweetness of his nature.

Our chief concern with McNeill is not as a man—as interesting as that view of him is—but as a poet, for it is as such that he must be judged by us and by posterity. Indeed, we may well inquire what are the qualities of the poetry that has won for him enthusiastic praise as one of the most gifted of Southern poets.

First of all, we must recognize McNeill's genius as essentially lyrical; with the self-analysis of the true artist he realized this, and "nowhere did he attempt the lofty theme or the lofty utterance."[2] Moreover, he found, in the life of his own people that he had chosen to represent, material suited to his powers of ex-

[1] Caldwell, J. P.: John Charles McNeill.
[2] Sledd, B. F.: McNeill the Poet.

pression, for he felt that such life was remarkable, not for the grandeur of its themes, but for their variety and richness in the lyrical vein. Thus, "his poems are always brief swallow-flights of song that dip their wings in the mingled shadow and sunshine of everyday life and skim away."[1] That he aimed at no more pretentious form of art than the song—as the titles of his little volumes suggest—is in itself proof of his kinship with the Scotch poets who, from the old ballad-writers to Burns, and on down to Stevenson, have ever been a race of singers. McNeill, too, was the born singer, and his poetry appeals to us largely because it is the pure gold of song "—song that requires nothing so much for its perfection as genuine poetic feeling, genuine music of heart."[2] Even greater in its appeal is his sincere love of nature—nature in her elemental moods, and nature that includes humanity as well. For McNeill is, preëminently, a poet of common life, a singer of the farm and fireside, and his poetry possesses that rare touch of nature that makes the whole world kin. Here, again, in his sympathetic presentations of the simple aspects of nature and the "ingleside moods," he has followed the traditions which have made Scotch poetry famous. In so doing he was not leaving the realm of his own temperament and experience, for he, himself, was "racy of the soil," and had a "humorous, quaint, backwoods sense of homely values."[3] Training and close contact with a more sophisticated society had not robbed his early environment of that glamour of primitive life which always fascinated him and impelled him to search out with especial interest any homely tale, simple superstition or bit of folk-lore.

The study of his own people and the interpretation of their uneventful lives was a large part of McNeill's work. Truly he was "the spokesman for the silent rhymes of rough lives and soft hearts,"[4] for he found the natives of the North Carolina farms, with their few wants and ignorance of the world's ways,

[1] Sledd, B. F.: McNeill the Poet.
[2] Carlyle, Thomas: Essay on Burns.
[3] Henderson, Archibald: John Charles McNeill.
[4] Gray, R. L.: An Inarticulate Obituary.

a type whose simplicity and isolation impressed him strongly. Yet his realism, as homely as it is, is far from pessimistic in attitude; none understood better than he the lives of these people—their lack of opportunity, their unsatisfied ambitions, their wearisome, monotonous toil—but he also knew the care-free happiness of their simple pleasures, and the joy of contact with the world of nature. And, knowing all, he preferred to be a Burns, rather than a Crabbe, and painted, for the most part, the brighter side of the picture, giving only one striking sketch of the tragic barrenness of such life in *The Drudge*. As his mood was never distorted by pessimism, it also remained free from sentimentality, even when he was dealing with subjects saturated with sentiment. "Gentleness, not softness, real feeling and not imaginative emotionalism, informed his verse, and his sentiment rang out clear and true."[1] The absolute sincerity and naturalness of his make-up left no room for sentimentality and pessimism; because he was young and vigorous, and life was sweet to him, he translated it in terms of happiness and humor.

Of the intimate glimpses McNeill has given us of human nature reduced to its more primitive forms, the poems dealing with negro life, customs and superstitions are undoubtedly his most original contribution to our literature. In fact, in his portrayal of negro life, he is excelled only by Joel Chandler Harris; what Harris has done to make the Georgia negro live in literature, McNeill has accomplished—in a more limited way, since restricted by poetical form—in preserving the life of the North Carolina darkey. For McNeill, belonging to the generation just after the Civil War, when many of the traits of the life of the Old South still lingered—especially in the more remote sections—had the opportunity of knowing, at first hand, in his early association with house-servants and field-hands, on his father's farm, the ante-bellum type of negro. The impressions thus received, in an imaginative boyhood, were intensified by his later contact with a more modern and complex society;

[1] Henderson, Archibald: John Charles McNeill.

thus, he has been able to impart to his poetry the subtle flavor of old plantations and days long past.

In the vivid sketches of the negro, whose customs and characteristics McNeill has so accurately and sympathetically presented in his poetry, he has given us, at the same time, both the individual and the type for the whole race. Anyone familiar with the southern negro can recognize, at once, the pictures of the garrulous "uncle" and "mammy," the "trifling" corn-field hand, the officious preacher, and the more recent development—the colored gentleman of the city; yet, each of these is highly individualized, with definite characteristics of his own. All of these McNeill skilfully allows to express their individuality by chatting to us, in their own language, about subjects of particular interest to them—the "whys-and-wherefores" of creation, religious beliefs, "hants," diseases, the daily round of toil and pleasure. Although we feel that the poet is nearby, taking a lively interest in the scene, he does not permit his personality to intrude, except in the selection *Mr. Nigger,* an introductory poem to *Lyrics from Cotton Land,* which humorously sums up the importance of the negro.

Of special interest is the treatment of the negro as a religious enthusiast. The emotional type of religion indulged in by the negro is admirably represented in *'Ligion* and *The August Meeting.* In the latter, a dignified old darkey tells of the glorious beginning of the meeting, with "de flo' full er people in a trance," and "de preacher swayin', en preachin' en er prayin'," and the ignominious ending in a free-for-all fight. There are, also, the amusing attempts of the negro to stretch his limited philosophy of life enough to embrace the Scriptures, in *Noah's Ark, Naming the Animals, Three Hypotheses, Nigger Demus, Convenient Theology* and *One Sided,* where he "wrastles" in vain with "No-y's" problems of feeding the stock, Adam and Eve's task of naming the animals, the mystery of his own color, the doctrines of the Baptist Church, and similar theological subtleties. A good example of his manner of reasoning on such subjects is to be found in *Three Hypotheses:*

"If Marse Adam wus white, Rose Anner,
If Miss Eve wus white lak him
(Dat's how de pictures makes 'em;
De Scriptur's a leetle dim)
Den whar did de nigger come fum?
'Twz a pine wid a 'simmon limb;
If Marse Adam wus white, Rose Anner,
En Miss Eve wus white lak him.

"I is a sunburnt white man,
'F a minner's a little trout,
You mus' go deeper'n dis here hide
To git de nigger out.
'F you skint me slam fum head to heel,
New nigger-hide 'u'd sprout.
Yas; I's a sunburnt white man—
'F a minner's a little trout."

The negro as a laborer has ever been a problem in the South, and McNeill has profited by conditions in giving us some fine portraiture—from the negro's viewpoint—in *A Protest, Preacherly Preference, A Modest Ploughman, A Tar Heel, The Crown of Power, The Siesta, Noontime,* and *A Soft Snap.* In these, various views on the subject are expressed, from the complaint of the pessimistically inclined agriculturalist, to the good-natured condescension of the preacher-ploughman. However, the whole question of labor is summed up, once for all, so far as the typical negro is concerned, in *A Few Days Off,* a negro version of the Epicurean philosophy:

"I ain't gwine a work till my dyin' day;
'F I ever lays up enough,
I's gwine a go off a while en stay;
I'll be takin' a few days off.
'Ca'se de jimson weeds don't bloom but once,
En when dey's shed dey's shed;
En when you's dead, 'taint jis' a few mont's,
But you's gwine be a long time dead."

It is, after all, the pleasure-loving, happy-go-lucky nature of the negro that makes him particularly interesting to us, and McNeill has given us many glimpses of this in his poetry. There is the unconscious and joyful response of the negro, a veritable child of nature, to the awakening of life, in *Spring* and *Springtime,* and his longing to be at one with nature in *Wishing.* His love of sport, combined with that of "good eatin's," is seen in *The Catfish, The Raccoon* and the many poems on the 'possum, who, as his opponent in the fascinating game of hide-and-seek, is even more essential to the negro's happiness than the mule, the comrade of his hours of toil. Thus McNeill has justly given the 'possum a large place in his poems of negro life, and he has admirably celebrated the close relationship of the two in such selections as, *The Three Frosties, The Trickster Tricked, 'Possum Time Again,* and *A Monologue.* Nor has he neglected the third of the trio—the persimmon tree. In *For Corn Shuckings* and *Folk Song* he has preserved the fragments of gay nonsense that he heard the darkeys sing, with joyous abandon, at various corn-shuckings, from farm to farm.

Nature presents to the negro a mysterious, as well as joyous aspect, and McNeill crystallizes the superstitions along this line in such poems as *Mysteries, Snakes,* and *Diseases.* The last is an especially good illustration of folk etymology, revealing, as it does, the negro's characteristic pride in diseases with high-sounding names (which be ludicrously confuses) and his faith in home-cures and preventives:

> "En dis here nigger he don't brag,
> But 'roun his neck he totes a bag,
> En in dat bag—jis' sniff en see—
> Bees a ball er assyfidity!"

Besides the various views of the negro concerning animals, already mentioned, his typical attitude to them as fellow beings, endowed with individuality and the gift of speech, has been presented in *The Varmint Convention,* in which McNeill, while not approaching Joel Chandler Harris' comprehensive and real-

istic portrayal in this field, has at least tried his hand at it with success.

Perhaps the most delightful of all the portraits McNeill has painted for us are those of the "old time mammy," good-natured and easy-going, but, occasionally, quite severe with her children, both black and white. For the pickaninnies are, properly, always in the back ground of these pictures, and we see mammy putting them to work in the cotton-patch, petting and scolding them, in turn, and singing them to sleep with fearful tales of "hants" and "ghos'es," in the poems, *In Dew, Selfishness, Po' Baby, Obedience, Be Shame, A Hindrance,* and *Bedtime.* There is, also, one charming glimpse back into ante-bellum days, in *Old Aunt Pleasant,* in which the old woman tells her "white chile," who has grown up, of her part in his mother's romance.

Thus, McNeill has dealt, in brief compass but to good effect, with the outstanding phases and characteristics of negro-life. He has done more than preserve for us the rapidly-disappearing customs and superstitions of this peculiar people; he has, likewise, fixed their language. It is difficult to compare his rendition of the negro dialect with that of other writers who have handled it with mastery and skill, for the reason that the negro of each section has his peculiar patois, and McNeill sought to represent only the manner and mode of speech of his own locality. That he has done this accurately and consistently is the opinion of those who have a knowledge of the old type of negro in Eastern North Carolina.

Also, through his intimate knowledge of Scotch life, he has made successful use of that dialect, and has given a humorous, but sympathetic interpretation of Scotch characteristics in *The Rejected Scotsman.* And, there are several interesting examples of the backwoodsman dialect which recall some of the qualities that have given James Whitcomb Riley and Frank L. Stanton their fame. The best of these poems—with the exception of those dealing with child-life, to be discussed later—is *Cats* which sums up, in a quaint, humorous way, the superstitions and antip-

athies of the more ignorant part of the race, regarding the common household pet.

Next to the dialect poems, in the representation of the simpler aspects of human nature, McNeill is happiest in his interpretation of child-life, for he combines the recollections of his own childhood with a sympathetic observation of children. Of his own life as a boy on the farm, he has given interesting glimpses in *Holding Off the Calf, When the Calves Get Out, Barefooted, Ambition, Boys' Visions* and *Before Bedtime,* which, with their "chuckling air of boyish freedom" and homely realism, speak for the whole tribe of the American small boy. The best of these, for its fine fidelity to the facts of boyhood, and imaginative power of calling up a simple, familiar scene, is *Before Bedtime:*

"The cat sleeps in a chimney jam
With ashes in her fur,
An' Tige, from on the yuther side,
He keeps his eye on her.

"The jar o' curds is on the hearth,
An' I'm the one to turn it.
I'll crawl in bed an' go to sleep
When Maw begins to churn it.

"Paw bends to read his almanax
An' study out the weather,
An' bud has got a gourd o' grease
To ile his harness leather.

"Sis looks an' looks into the fire,
Half-squintin' through her lashes,
An' I jis watch my tater where
It shoots smoke through the ashes."

Also, in the imaginative play of children, especially that of his little cousins, whose fun he often shared as one of them, McNeill found material suitable for simple poetic treatment in *A Secret, The Summer Resort, Tot and Ted, The Three Tots, The Old*

Bad Woman, Grand-daddy Long Legs and *The Doodle Bug.* In *The Secret,* with its almost perfect simplicity of presentation, he comes nearest "achieving the finality of self-effacement"[1] which distinguishes Wordsworth's presentation of child-life. There are besides this, two other poems in which McNeill shows a fine ability to understand and enter into the spirit of childhood—even of infancy—the whimsical lines *To Alfonso XIV,* and *A Christmas Hymn,* with its tender blending of the human and the divine.

The last-named selections might, also, be properly classed with the occasional poems which are written in literary English, and are reflective in mood. The best examples of these are *Paul Jones, M. W. Ransom, Odessa, To Melvin Gardner: Suicide,* and *An Easter Hymn.* In each of these, as decidedly different as the themes are, McNeill, by means of his sensitive nature, has been able to express himself with a singular breadth of sympathy and appreciation.

Closely connected with the occasional poems are the personal tributes to friends, including that to his mother, already mentioned, the exquisite lines *To One Who is Good,* and *To.....,* the tender expression of affection in *Sunburnt Boys,* and the kindly tributes to the humble friends of "those wild, rough, go-lucky days" of boyhood in *Old Jim Swink, Tommy Smith,* and *Jesse Covington.*

However, it is in the love poems that the highest pitch of McNeill's singing quality and the greatest intensity of his nature are exhibited, for with him love was the one thing worth while in the world. Of him it has been said, "Women he adored, with a frankness that was the ultimate of reverence; to men he was not ashamed to express affection; for life he was not afraid to admit his passion,"[2] and he has, himself, declared:

> "But I will cast my fate with love, and trust
> Her honeyed heart that guides the pollened bee
> And sets the happy wing-seeds fluttering free."[3]

---

[1] Graham, Edward K.: The Poetry of John Charles McNeill.
[2] Gray, R. L.: An Inarticulate Obituary.
[3] McNeill: "Attraction."

Like Burns, McNeill has touched the various notes of the divine passion in his songs. There is the grace of vers de société—with its lightness and spontaneity—in *For Jane's Birthday, Trifles, A Photograph, Valentine, A Dream of You, She Being Young,* and *Love's Fashion;* the low, flowing tones that suggest at once a calm and rapturous mood are sung in *Reminiscence, At the Dance,* and *Attraction;* the tender depths of passion are touched in *Pardon Time, Alcestis,* and *The Bride;* there is the exquisite minor key of love in *Dead,* and its tragedy in *The Wife, Two Pictures,* and *Deserted;* last, there is the passionate abandon of youth in *Oh, Ask Me Not,* which is the essence of the lover's philosophy of life, in fullness of truth and perfection of phrase. This was McNeill's favorite of all his poems, for he felt that in it he had best expressed his purpose and art. Certainly, in it he best wrote himself—gay, yet thoughtful, stirred with ambitions and a desire for fame, but dazzled away from the search of it by the joy and beauty of living and loving. Noble in sentiment, it touches the very heart-chords, and reveals supremely McNeill's ability "to portray with subtlety and flexibility a strong, sweet passion."[1]

"Love, should I set my heart upon a crown,
Squander my years, and gain it
What recompense of pleasure could I own?
For youth's red drops would stain it.

"Much have I thought on what our lives may mean,
And what their best endeavor,
Seeing we may not come again to glean,
But, losing, lose forever.

"Seeing how zealots, making choice of pain,
From home and country parted,
Have thought it life to leave their fellows slain,
Their women broken-hearted;

[1] Graham, E. K.: The Poetry of John Charles McNeill.

"How teasing truth a thousand faces claims,
As in a broken mirror,
And what a father died for in the flames
His own son scorns as error;

"How even they whose hearts were sweet with song
Must quaff oblivion's potion,
And, soon or late, their sails be lost along
The all-surrounding ocean:

"Oh, ask me not the haven of our ships,
Nor what flag floats above you!
I hold you close, I kiss your sweet, sweet lips,
And love you, love you, love you!"

As has been suggested, McNeill is closely akin to the Scotch poets, not only in the sheer singing quality of his verse, and his power to portray the things of home and the elemental human heart, but also in his steadfast love and presentations of the simple aspects of nature. Throughout his poetry there is a constantly recurring note of nature that impresses one with the acuteness and sureness of an observation that will allow no sight and sound of out-of-doors to pass unnoticed. It is related by one of the poet's friends that he in company with several others was traveling along a dusty September road to a political meeting, where McNeill was to be the speaker of the occasion. While they livened the way with jests and laughter, they noticed that McNeill had fallen into silence, but thinking he was concerned with some detail of the speech he was to deliver, left him to his meditations, and, later, with a peculiar interest, they read, in *September,* the vivid description of what they had all seen without knowing it.[1]

McNeill could look across a landscape and see a poem in every meadow, and on every wooded hillside, and, better still, in the humblest objects of nature, even "an old gray stone that humps its back up through the mold."[2]

[1] Gray, R. L.: An Inarticulate Obituary.
[2] McNeill: If I Could Glimpse Him.

It was one of the ideals of his art, first to observe nature for himself, and then to reveal it to others, for he felt, very keenly, the lack of appreciation, and even of ability to see things beautiful in themselves, but unnoticed because commonplace. In connection with this, a cousin[1] of McNeill's—one of the *Sunburnt Boys*—tells the following simple but significant incident: "Running over to get Charles to go swimming with me, one day in early fall, I found him deep in the contemplation of a maple tree that flaunted its glory of color just outside his window. Unheeding my request he exclaimed: 'Perhaps, if I had been blind from birth, and could suddenly have my eyes opened to the beauty around me, I could write a poem that would win for that maple an immortality.'" With such zeal of observation and imaginative power, it is not surprising that his poetry possesses "the happy inspiration of the born nature lover."[2]

Nor was McNeill one of the enthusiasts of the back-to-nature movement, for with him nature was not an acquired taste, but a life-long passion. He was not a scientific student of nature, but rather a lover whose sincerity and faith nature rewarded with the revelation of her own soul. He, himself, says:

> "I did not affect a rapture unknown
> (May one not be honest when one is alone?)
> But I left free my heart with nature's to blend
> And share all her secrets as friend shares with friend."[3]

Thus, he is content in the main to observe with a rare accuracy of eye and ear, and to recreate, rather than explain or interpret, nature in all of her varying moods, so that we may interpret for ourselves and learn to love what we have before passed unnoticed, or deemed commonplace. Although his attitude is chiefly an objective one—that is, he sings of nature because of his joy in her outward manifestations of beauty, whether gray or gold—there is also a subtle sense of the presence

[1] Mr. Roy MacMillan.
[2] Sledd, B. F.: McNeill the Poet.
[3] McNeill: In the Woods.

of the human element felt in all of his nature-poetry. While nature is not regarded, necessarily, as a background for the display of human emotions in general and the poet's, in particular, there is so close a sympathy between nature and humanity that man seems almost a part of nature. This conception is delicately embodied in *Oblivion,* with its calm fatalism, and *Gray Days,* with its perfect picture of sorrow—rare tones in McNeill's joyous burst of song. In *Gray Days* the human note is introduced with great subtilty, for it is suggested, rather than expressed, by the mute eloquence of the picture:

"A soaking sedge,
A faded field, a leafless hill and hedge,

"Low clouds and rain,
And loneliness and languor worse than pain.

"Mottled with moss,
Each gravestone holds to heaven a patient cross.

"Shrill streaks of light
Two sycamores' clean-limbed, funereal white,

"And low between,
The sombre cedar and the ivy green.

"Upon the stone
Of each in turn who called this land his own

"The gray rain beats
And wraps the wet world in its flying sheets.

"And at my eaves
A slow wind, ghostlike, comes and grieves and grieves."

To a high degree, the effect of a mysterious sympathy between nature and human life, here produced, is due to McNeill's tendency to personify all nature. He once remarked: "I look upon nature as but another world, full of intelligent individuals, whose language we fail to understand. Each tree is a boon

companion, strong, full of character, and worthy of our love. The woodland is a peopled city. The flowers are our poets, and the stars our preachers, their silent constancy being more eloquent than the most powerful sermon ever preached by man. The sea is a demi-god, sad and disappointed, because of his half power. Each dawn to me is a new glorification of the wonderful sweetness of youth, and each blessed twilight a symbol of life's ending. The spirit of the wind is the spirit of lost souls. There is all the mystery and silence of death in the stillness of the midnight hour."[1]

Nowhere in McNeill's poetry is nature's personality more beautifully and sympathetically conceived than in *October,* which is in the opinion of many critics the finest poem ever written by a North Carolinian. Of it, as gifted a scholar as Dr. C. Alphonso Smith has written: "I had rather be the author of those lines than to have the finest monument North Carolina ever erected." So strikingly does it reveal McNeill's intimate association with nature, and express the common feeling—half glory, half regret—of mankind, in the presence of autumn, that to those of us who know the poem the month of October can never come without a thought of it and of the poet whose untimely death occurred in the midst of the autumn-splendor.

"The thought of old, dear things is in thine eyes,
O, month of memories!
Musing on days thine heart hath sorrow of,
Old joy, dead hope, dear love.

"I see thee stand where all thy sisters meet
To cast down at thy feet
The garnered largess of the fruitful year,
And on thy cheek a tear.

"Thy glory flames in every blade and leaf
To blind the eyes of grief;
Thy vineyards and thine orchards bend with fruit
That sorrow may be mute;

[1] Harmon, H. E.: John Charles McNeill and His Work.

"A hectic splendor lights thy days to sleep,
Ere the gray dusk may creep
Sober and sad along thy dusty ways,
Like a lone nun, who prays;

"High and faint-heard thy passing migrant calls;
Thy lazy lizard sprawls
On his gray stone, and many slow winds creep
About thy hedge, asleep;

"The sun swings farther toward his love, the south,
To kiss her glowing mouth;
And death, who steals among thy purpling bowers,
Is deeply hid in flowers.

"Would that thy streams were Lethe, and might flow
Where lotus blossoms blow,
And all the sweets wherewith thy riches bless
Might hold no bitterness!

"Would, in thy beauty, we might all forget
Dead days and old regret,
And through thy realm might fare us forth to roam,
Having no thought for home!

"And yet I feel, beneath thy queen's attire,
Woven of blood and fire,
Beneath the golden glory of thy charm
Thy mother heart beats warm,

"And if, mayhap, a wandering child of thee,
Weary of land and sea,
Should turn him homeward from his dreamer's quest
To sob upon thy breast,

"Thine arm would fold him tenderly, to prove
How thine eyes brimmed with love,
And thy dear head, with all a mother's care,
Would rest upon his hair."

In connection with this, we should study *September,* which, while it does not possess the same carrying power of the fancy,

contains fine descriptive touches; the two poems, taken together, show a rare ability to discriminate between similar landscape moods and revive them in their fullness and beauty. Autumn appealed strongly to McNeill, and he has reproduced its many aspects. As *October* touches the minor chords of memory and regret, and *September* voices the simple beauty of a landscape, so *Harvest,* with its song of "the last load home," expresses the joy of fullfilment that is so vital a part of the autumn spirit, and *Autumn* breathes forth calm and contentment. In *One Day* there is the bliss of living in the midst of a perfect beauty:

> "I had not changed, if I had been God,
> One shadowed mountain, one golden rod!"

And there is a sense of the mystery moving in nature in *If I Could Glimpse Him* and *In the Woods:*

> "And in the weird spirit that autumn controls,
> I thought I had felt the presence of souls,
> The mystic desire of the heart ill at ease,
> Which all men pursue and no man may appease."

Equally great was the impress of springtime on the poet's soul; we feel the joy and freshness of spring and the thrill of life in such poems as *In a Canoe, A Tomtit Messenger, The First Flower, When I Go Home, Sunburnt Boys,* and especially, *Away Down Home,* which is so excellent a portrayal of spring in Eastern North Carolina, and so filled with devotion to home and mother and all the good old things of youth that it may well rank, simple and unpretending as it is, as one of the finest songs of the state. However, McNeill's supreme achievement on this subject is *To Melvin Gardner: Suicide,* for it is the best single piece giving expression to his genius and character, the most complete view of him as poet, and as lover of nature. In the effective contrast of life at the high tide with death, and in the beauty and pathos of the verse there is the work of the

artist, and there is more—a passionate feeling for nature, a sympathy for poor, erring humanity, and a sense of the hopeless mystery of untimely death.

"A flight of doves, with wanton wings
Flash white against the sky.
In the leafy copse an oriole sings,
And a robin sings hardby.
Sun and shadow are out on the hills;
The swallow has followed the daffodils;
In leaf and blade, life throbs and thrills
Through the wild warm heart of May.

"To have seen the sun come back, to have seen
Children again at play,
To have heard the thrush when the woods are green
Welcome the new-born day,
To have felt the soft grass cool to the feet,
To have smelt earth's incense, heavenly sweet,
To have shared the laughter along the street,
And, then, to have died in May!

"A thousand roses will blossom red,
A thousand hearts be gay
For the summer lingers just ahead
And June is on her way;
The bee must bestir him to fill his cells,
The moon and the stars will weave new spells
Of love and the music of marriage bells—
And, oh, to be dead in May!"

McNeill presents, with great accuracy and sympathy not only wood, river, field and flower, but also those creatures that dwell in them and are a part of nature. He had not outgrown the strong affection of his childhood, for animals; his interest in them had increased until it extended to the poorest of creatures. He did not consider a day spent in the woods, watching the wild-wasps, dirt-daubers, basking scorpion, lunging trout, and water-spiders, one ill-spent, as he has shown us in *An Idyl.* Besides the dialect poems already mentioned, there are many

bits of animal description to be found in the nature poems, but the best single pieces dealing with animal-life are *A Caged Mocking-Bird* and *The Rattlesnake.* The first, a beautiful tribute to the sweetest of southern songsters, the "vision bringer" who recalls to the poet his "barefooted boyhood" deserves to rank, in its delicate subjective treatment, with Lanier's poems to the same bird, and even with Burns' *Sonnet on Hearing a Thrush Sing.* Uniqueness of conception and vividness of description characterize *The Rattlesnake,* in the short compass of which McNeill has succeeded in conveying a sense of the fascination and terror common to mankind in connection with the snake, and especially, the rattler.

There yet remains one of the most important characteristics of McNeill's nature poetry—the revelation of the Creator in His handiwork. We have seen that, in the main, he presents nature objectively—for her own sake; but, he is led by this affectionate observation from the most obvious things to the profound thoughts back of them. He does not give us much deliberately expressed philosophy; his knowledge has come to him by absorption and association, rather than by analysis, and he allows us to draw our own conclusions about the pictures he sets before us. He does not even attempt an explanation of the beauty and mystery of nature, although he has shown us that he sees the beauty and is conscious of the mystery in such poems as *The Vision, At Sea, Sonnet, An Invalid, The Iron Door, An Easter Hymn,* and *L'Envoi.*

Nor is he, by any means, a pantheist; he feels in all nature the presence of God, but nowhere does he worship God through nature. In plain words he reveals his attitude to the subject:

> "Now should I wish to stand in awe
> And worship what I love,
> The old grass cool beneath my feet
> And the old stars calm above."[1]

[1] McNeill: A Choice.

and again:

> "But she, God's creation, is silent as God,
> Dumb as the blossom she calls from the sod;
> And her worshipper fancies 'tis she that reveals
> The wonders and signs that his own spirit feels."[1]

This contemplation of nature that shades off into worshipful quiescence, rather than rises into religious ecstasy, finds its highest expression in the exquisite little lyric entitled *Sundown:*

> "Hills, wrapped in gray, standing along the west;
> Clouds, dimly lighted, gathering slowly;
> The star of peace at watch above the crest—
> Oh, holy, holy, holy!
>
> "We know, O Lord, so little what is best;
> Wingless, we move so lowly;
> But in thy calm all-knowledge let us rest—
> Oh, holy, holy, holy."

In this poem, McNeill approaches nearest Wordsworth's insight into nature; however, while he possesses a more appealing human sweetness, he lacks the religious fervor that characterizes Wordsworth's contemplation, and thus never attains to the spiritual rapture that has given the great English poet first place as interpreter of the mysticism of nature.

Thus, McNeill, through his love for nature, has learned her deeper meaning, as well as the many secrets of her outer life; and, presenting all of this in a language intelligible to man, he has imparted to the dark Lumbee River, and the fields and forests of Eastern North Carolina a nameless charm.

Deeply embodied in all of the poetry McNeill has written, whether of nature or human-nature, or in joyous or pensive mood, there is the love of life—life however it may come to him, and, with it, there is the love of youth. His poetry is eternally young, with the fire and thrill of the free young life of one who did not live to be old; thus, he has none of the

[1] McNeill: In the Woods.

temperamental melancholy of youth, and none of the disillusionment of old age, and his poetry has the power of recalling the best things of youth. "We have felt his plea for life and love in *To Melvin Gardner: Suicide,* and in *The Tenant* there is the same desire to "drink life to the lees."

> "Patient, O Death, thy reign is hereafter,
> Bide thee thy crowning, and keep thee apart!
> Mine this estate, this lease upon laughter,
> Mine all the love in my heart!"

It is inconceivable to him that life and the world of nature and humanity can ever become common-place, as we see in *A Prayer.* If ever he utters scorn, it is against those who would reduce life to a coldly-calculated process. *Protest* and *If I Could Glimpse Him* are a denunciation of the growing materialism in art and life which suggest the attitude of Wordsworth's famous sonnet, *The World is Too Much With Us.* This eagerness for freedom of life and spirit finds its best expression in *Dawn,* a companion piece to *Sundown* in its beauty of setting and nobility of utterance. Brief as it is, it presents at once a rare picture and a soul longing, and for artistic finish is excelled by few poems in our literature.

> "The hills again reach skyward with a smile.
> Again, with waking life along its way,
> The landscape marches westward, mile on mile
> And time throbs white into another day.
>
> "Though eager life must wait on livelihood,
> And all our hopes be tethered to the mart,
> Lacking the eagle's wild, high freedom, would
> That ours might be this day the eagle's heart."

This reaching out for freedom and perfection of art is accompanied by a keen realization of the hopelessness of attainment, in *The Castle Builder* and *Tomorrow.* McNeill once remarked to a friend: "There are so many beautiful things in the world, and these produce so many beautiful thoughts that

I find myself writing more than I should. But, alas! the finest songs escape me entirely; I can catch and transcribe only their faintest echoes."[1]

Although he felt the impossibility of attaining to his fine and noble ideal of art, he bowed before it, as to a goddess who could not be appeased. While following the ideas of Burns, he held up for himself the artistic ideals of Poe; and so steadily did he strive for greater perfection of phrase and clearer delineation of motive that one is impressed with a certain completeness and flawlessness of workmanship. Even his first volume lacks the extravagances and imperfections one would naturally expect to find, and the least successful of the verses contain what Matthew Arnold has termed "the poet's fluidity of utterance."

While he never attempts any province save the lyrical, and his verse forms are the simple ones of song that wells up, in unpremeditated art in the heart of the singer, he draws upon all the richnesss of the lyrical vein, and his verse medium is both varied and adequate. In other words, the thought and verse of his poetry are happily mated. The simplicity and nobility of *Dawn* and *Sundown* are expressed by the use of the simplest quartrains; a fine sense of sorrow, desolation and tragedy is conveyed by the bare couplets of *Gray Days, Oblivion,* and *Deserted;* and the anapestic metre of the lines in *97: The Fast Mail* produces a good racing effect, well suited to the subject. The three-verse stanza used in *The Rattlesnake* and *The Prisoner* has, also, a distinctive charm. McNeill was especially fond, however, of the eight-verse stanza which because of its greater complexity is capable of expressing more subtilely the reflective moods as in *To Melvin Gardner: Suicide, Paul Jones, etc.* He was, also, capable of handling the more elaborate lyric forms, such as the sonnet, in *Home Songs* and *Sleep.* There is one example of a smooth, flowing, expressive blank verse in *Alcestis*—verse which suits admirably the classic tone of the poem.

[1] Harmon, H. E.: John Charles McNeill and His Work.

The diction likewise is felicitous and unpretentious, for one of McNeill's chief claims as poet is the haunting quality of his verse. His genius is suggestive, as well as descriptive, and he has the gift of crystallizing in one fine phrase the spiritual content of thought. There are expressions that stick in the memory, recurring to us again and again:—"his widowed sea" (*Paul Jones*); "the twitter of killdees keen in the air; the cardinal—a blaze of light, his song a blaze of sound"; the "cold, earthy thrill" of the rattlesnake; "the glory and the guilt of womanhood" (*The Two Pictures*), etc. Everywhere, there is the grace and freedom of expression of the true poet.

In summarizing, we may say that the dominant notes of McNeill's work are a simplicity, sincerity and tenderness, of phrase and feeling. He has for all living things—the caged bird, the baby in its crib, the little white bride, the helpless invalid, the drudge, the prisoner, the deserted girl, the outcast woman—a sympathy that can understand and forgive, and he has expressed it with simplicity and sincerity. "At a time when poetry has lost the appeal of passion, it is peculiarly grateful to come into the warm confidence of emotion always gentle, intimate and manly, and, in its best moments, infinitely tender, and that restores the simple, fundamental tones and moods it has ever been the peculiar function of poetry best to express."[1] McNeill, in his *Folk Song* has suggested this mood and function of his songs:

> "And that some simple shepherd, singing of
> His pain and love,
> May haply find
> His heart-song speaks the heart of all his kind."

An estimate of McNeill's genius is much more difficult than a criticism of his poetry, for here the question of the unwritten must be considered, as in the case of all those who have died young, and have left us, in the record of what is, the glorious promise of what might have been. Dr. Mims, in writing of

[1] Mims, Edwin: Sidney Lanier.

Sidney Lanier, has aptly expressed this feeling for the unachieved: "He is one of the inheritors of unfulfilled renown, not simply because he died young, but because what he had done and what he planned to do gave promise of a much better and more enduring work. Such men as he (Lanier) and Keats must be judged, to be sure, by their actual achievement; but there will always attach to their names the glory of the unfulfilled life, a fame out of all proportion to the work accomplished."[1]

A similar verdict, although to a less degree, may be passed on McNeill. There is, of course, the possibility that he would soon have exhausted his poetic vein, since he had won his way to success so easily, or that the necessity of writing to the dead, uniform level of newspapers and magazines would have interfered with a free and full development of his talents. However, the poetry which he wrote last, and under the most disadvantageous conditions, did not give any sign of such deterioration, and it was the opinion of those who knew his ability best that, "with further maturity of thought, breadth of experience and continual poetical practice and polish,"[2] he would become one of the great verse-writers of our time and country. For, it must be remembered that, although McNeill had reached the age of thirty-three, only the last three or four years of his life counted, so far as his artistic work was concerned—the rest had been a period of training, and of arrested development. With his appreciation of art and his love of nature and of man, he had laid the foundations for a greater career than that he had had time to achieve.

Speculations as to what he might have done with larger opportunities, with a longer span of years, and with a greater concentration of effort, unhampered by "the hapless attempt to mingle in friendly union the common spirit of the world with the spirit of poetry,"[3] are natural and interesting, but they should not interfere with a judicial estimate of what McNeill

[1] Mims, Edwin: Sidney Lanier.
[2] Moore, H. C.: John Charles McNeill.
[3] Carlyle, Thomas: Essay on Burns.

actually achieved. "When the admiration of his friends no longer counts," will his work still live because of its own enduring quality? This is a question no one can rightly answer, but if the object of poetry is to stir our emotions and make us feel and think, by setting problems before us, at least McNeill has not written in vain, and if, as Carlyle says,[1] sincerity, the power to make the humblest subject interesting, and a "keenness of insight that keeps pace with keenness of feeling" are the characteristics of the true poet, we may give him that title.

Thus, although we find in McNeill's poetry much that is commonplace and, occasionally, the record of a man who was driving a talent, we find more that is stamped with the quality of genius. Dr. Graham, in speaking of his work has said: "It is a collection deeply sympathetic and true, with real sweetness and with inspiration equally real and true. Conviction of great poetic power we seldom feel, in reading it, but the presence of the divine gift of poetry we are always sensible of—the gift to minister to some need of the spirit, as when a simple heart-song speaks the heart of all mankind."[2]

We North Carolinians who labor to a certain extent under a McNeill cult bespeak for him no other place than that of a minor poet who has written a score or so of poems that command the hearts of all who are susceptible to beauty. But, it is enough that we call him poet; the world of poetry is a very wide one, for it includes not only a Shakespeare and a Milton, but also those who make a simple appeal to the heart of the reader, often lacking in the greater poets—a Longfellow, and even a McNeill.

We hail him as poet, and better still we hail him as pioneer of a new movement in the Old North State—a movement away from materialism and artificiality back to simple life and elemental passions. To the state with which he was so closely identified, his breadth of sympathy and high ideals of art

[1] Carlyle, Thomas: Essay on Burns.
[2] Graham, E. K.: The Poetry of John Charles McNeill.

should be a constant protest against the hindrances of the past, and a strong incentive to a rich future.

"Were I to symbolize North Carolina in a piece of splendid sculpture, I should image no Rip Van Winkle, musty with traditions and prejudices of the past, awaking from an ante-bellum dream. It should be represented by no man of middle age, fatigued with the heat and labor of the day, struggling up a steep acclivity to the precarious pinnacle of materialistic success. It should be symbolized as a youth, just stretching his limbs in readiness for the part he is so soon to play in the spiritual life of the nation. The head should not be hung in shame for imputed backwardness or rebelliousness in the past, but held high, the eyes uplifted, the face transfigured by the light of the ideal, and wearing an expression which gladly says Yea to all the Universe. And the face of this statue should be the face of John Charles McNeill."[1]

[1] Henderson, Archibald: John Charles McNeill.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bailey, J. W.: John Charles McNeill.
   (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
2. Bailey, J. W.: John Charles McNeill—the Man and Poet.
   (Proceedings of State Lit. and Historical Association, 1908)
3. Bryant, H. E. C.: A New John Charles McNeill Book.
   (The *Charlotte Observer*, Oct. 24, 1909)
4. Caldwell, J. P.: John Charles McNeill.
   (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
5. Carlyle, Thomas: Essay on Burns.
6. Conn, E. L.: North Carolina Mourns the Death of a Poet.
   (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
7. Durham, Plato: Preface to Lyrics from Cotton Land.
8. Garrell, J. H.: John Charles McNeill.
   (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
9. Graham, Edward K.: The Poetry of John Charles McNeill.
   (The *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. VI, No. 1)
10. Gray, R. L.: An inarticulate Obituary.
    (The Raleigh *News and Observer*, Oct. 19, 1907)
11. Harman, Henry E.: The Work of John Charles McNeill.
    (The *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. XV, No. 4)
12. Henderson, Archibald: John Charles McNeill—An Artistic Appreciation.
    (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
13. McNeill, John Charles: Songs Merry and Sad.
14. McNeill, John Charles: Lyrics from Cotton Land.
15. McNinch, Mary Troone: John Charles McNeill and the Silver Cord.
    (*Skyland Magazine*, April, 1917)
16. Mims, Edwin: Sidney Lanier.
17. Moore, Hight C.: John Charles McNeill.
    (*North Carolina Booklet*, Vol. V, No. 2.)
18. North Carolina Day Program, 1910.
19. Page, H. F.: John Charles McNeill—Some Reminiscences.
    (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
20. Poe, Clarence: An Appreciation of John Charles McNeill's Poetical Genius.
    (*North Carolina Review*)
21. Sledd, B. F.: McNeill the Poet.
    (The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)

22. Taylor, Chas. E.: The Student Life of John Charles McNeill.
(The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
23. White, Lee: John Charles McNeill as College Journalist.
(The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)
24. White, Lee: Editorial to
(The *Wake Forest Student*, Vol. XXVII, No. 4)

Acknowledgment is, also, due Judge R. D. W. Connor of the North Carolina Historical Commission, and the following members of Mr. McNeill's family: Mrs. J. D. Powers, Kinston, N. C.; Mrs. Benjamin Parham, Oxford, N. C.; Mr. Roy MacMillan and Miss Kate MacMillan, Riverton, N. C.

HONOR ROLL

FIRST SEMESTER, 1925–1926

First Honor

Barnwell, Bertha
Beavers, Jane
Bowers, Maude
Braswell, Oleene
Byrum, Gladys
Carroll, Iva
Dail, Katie
Dunning, Dorothy
Eagles, Margaret
Elkins, Elsie
Fordham, Mae
Hoggard, Mabel Claire
Horner, Annie
James, Mabel
Jolly, Evelyn
Leonard, Paige
Lineberry, Margaret
Lineberry, Foy
Maddry, Katherine
Maynard, Martha
O'Kelley, Mary
Peebles, Mary
Purnell, Elizabeth
Scarborough, Frances
Scarborough, Julia Moore
Seawell, Mary Robert
Strickland, Jessie Belle
Thomas, Bess
Walton, Katie Lee
Wheeler, Margaret

Second Honor

Abbott, Annabelle
Alderman, Mary
Ange, Fannie Mae
Baity, Hazel
Branch, Virginia
Buffaloe, Elizabeth
Cavenaugh, Flora
Cheek, Emily
Davis, Ruby
Eagles, Mattie Lee
Elliott, Madaline
Harris, Frances
Hartsfield, Jennie Mae
Hewlett, Betty
Holloway, Inez
Jackson, Bessie
Jones, Lucile
Lane, Elinor
Peacock, Carolyn
Pittman, Olive
Stroud, Beulah
Warrick, Leone
Weatherspoon, Laura
Williams, Lena Mae

Points

No. of classes per week	*Points for first honor*	*Points for second honor*
12	27	22
13	29	24
14	31	26
15	33	28
16	35	30
17	37	32
18	40	34

Grades

A, gives 3 points per semester hour of credit
B, gives 2 points per semester hour of credit
C, gives 1 point per semester hour of credit
D, gives 0 point per semester hour of credit
E, gives -1 point per semester hour of credit
F, gives -2 point per semester hour of credit

3 0112 105822214